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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the use of error analysis by teachers of English as a second language and suggests that error analysis should be used in regular composition courses as well. Teachers who use error analysis emphasize learning from one's mistakes rather than simply drilling to eliminate mistakes; they use errors as clues to the cognitive strategies that students employ when handling new information. Such an approach to process rather than product eliminates the problem and not just the evidence of a problem. (RL)

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The Development of Error Analysis and Its Implications
for the Teaching of Composition.

Teachers of basic writing skills have perennially been concerned with "error." There is a familiar caricature of the composition teacher as a revenge-thirsty monster wielding pen and red ink to bloody a stunned freshman's paper. We hope that this caricature is more fiction than fact. The overkill of massive corrections is difficult to justify on any grounds. Over the last several years, we have tried to approach our students' errors from a different point of view. We have begun to view errors as exceptionally interesting clues about what is going on in our students' minds, as clues to the linguistic and cognitive processes that function unobserved.

Our view of errors has been shaped by a particular aspect of our experience. Although we now teach basic writing skills, we have both taught English as a Second Language (hereafter ESL)--one of us in Europe, the other in Asia and Africa. While teaching English to non-native speakers, we listened to what a number of teachers and applied linguists were saying about how they approached the problem of error in language learning. We would like to present some of the major approaches to error that have been influential in ESL, because we believe that teachers of native speakers can gain a new perspective

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by considering the matter of error from the second language point of view.

There have been three different approaches to error in ESL. First, there was an approach which we will call "corrective analysis." Errors were bad and pernicious, signs that the learner was still in a benighted state, lacking skills and deprived of knowledge. Some teachers kept lists of recurring errors, but little attempt was made to see patterns of errors or to seek causes for them in anything other than learner ignorance of the correct form. This approach is comparable to the "bleeding pen" approach to errors employed by some teachers of composition to native speakers. In this approach, teachers mark errors and write marginal comments, but there is no attempt to see a system in the errors students make.

Next came the "contrastive analysis" approach. ESL teachers began to see system in languages and thus were prepared to detect patterns in the errors that emerged when two languages, the student's native language (NL) and the target language (TL), collided in a language learning situation. The systematic nature of learners' errors was predicted and/or explained by the contrastive analysis hypothesis: students will err in the TL where it differs from their NL. A Vietnamese student of English, for example, may say He write fas instead of He writes fast because his language has no consonant clusters. In the view of contrastive analysts, errors were of interest to theorists, but bad for learners. There was little tolerance for error in contrastive analysis pedagogy, primarily because this pedagogy was a marriage of structural linguistics and

behaviorism.¹ Influenced by behaviorist learning theory, teachers worried that if a student repeated a pattern erroneously, this wrong pattern might become a habit that would be difficult to extinguish later.

The contrastive analysis approach is similar in some respects to the "dialect interference" approach in native-speaker English pedagogy; indeed, some educators have recommended that pattern drills, which were a very important component of the contrastive-analysis-based Audio-lingual Method, be used to give American speakers of minority dialects a command of standard English, to make them "bi-dialectal." Although the goal of bi-dialectalism has been rejected by many as both unethical and impractical, dialect interference is still popular as an explanation of why speakers of minority dialects make many errors in composition. According to the dialect interference approach, speakers of non-standard dialects write badly because they speak a dialect more at odds with standard written English than the dialect of standard English speakers. This view has led to more tolerant attitudes toward error than those held by the proponents of contrastive analysis pedagogy in ESL. Dialect interference advocates have been more tolerant of error for two reasons: first, they were reacting to previous approaches to the errors of minority students, approaches that they believed misinterpreted surface errors as signs of cognitive disability and severe cultural deprivation; and second, unlike contrastive analysts in ESL, their approach to pedagogy was not behaviorist in

orientation (hence, they did not worry about wrong responses becoming habits that would be difficult to correct).²

Next came "error analysis," which is now the reigning approach to learner error in ESL. Error analysts are cognitivists, not behaviorists, in their psychological orientation. They look upon errors in the speech and writing of foreign students learning English in much the same way that Freud regarded slips of the tongue, or that Kenneth Goodman views "miscues" in reading: as clues to inner processes, as windows into the mind.³ Hence, errors are good for theorist and learner alike--good for the theorist because errors reflect the cognitive strategies the learner is using to process information; good for the learner because, as Dulay and Burt aptly state, "You can't learn without goofing."⁴

To make the three approaches more concrete, let's look at how the different analysts--corrective, contrastive, and error--would look at the same error. As an example, we will use the omission of the final -s on third person singular verbs in the simple present tense; this error is commonly made by ESL students, as well as by speakers of Black English Vernacular (BEV) in the United States. Both teachers of ESL and teachers of native speakers encounter errors such as those found in the following sentences excerpted from a composition by a BEV speaker from Detroit.

Marsha, ninety pound lighter is a lifetime Weight
Watcher now. Watching television, she no longer
eat potato chips.

Notice that the student has left the -s off the noun "pound" as well as omitted the -s from the verb "eat." We would like

to concentrate on the latter error, the omission of the -s from the verb. How would the different analysts handle this error if it occurred in the paper of a foreign student learning English? The corrective analyst would circle the error in red, explain to the student that he had committed a greivous error, and admonish him not to repeat it again. A contrastive analyst would explain the error (to himself) as most likely a result of language interference, and would then contrast the student's NL with English to confirm his hypothesis. If he found the student spoke a language such as Vietnamese with no consonant clusters and no inflected verb forms, he would offer one or both of these disparities between the two languages as the explanation for the error.

The error analyst, however, would approach the same error in a different way. He would agree that omitting the -s might be an interference error, but even if it were, this does not necessarily mean the student is a passive learner, a slave to his first language habits. He may be actively applying learning strategies. The student's problem may be that he applied the wrong strategy. Perhaps he speaks a language in which verbs are not inflected. Deciding to handle TL verbs as he has always handled verbs in his own language, that is by not inflecting them, he tries this approach on English verbs. His strategy doesn't work, he goofs, but he has a strategy. And if his teacher reacts to his error in an appropriate way, the student can discover a new strategy (rather than memorize one new item).

The error analyst would also point out other possible explanations for this error, the -s omission error. One explanation stems not from the learner's language, but rather from the verb system of standard English. There is an intra-lingual explanation (within the TL) as well as an interlingual explanation (between the NL and TL).⁵ Perhaps noticing that English verbs in the present tense generally are not inflected for the different persons (i.e., I go, you go, we go, they go), the student adopts a strategy of generalization and decides to operate on the hypothesis that no present tense verb in any person has an inflected ending. The student may even find confirmation for his overgeneralization in constructions such as Does he eat there often? or He can eat everything--where the stem form of the verb occurs next to the third person singular pronoun. Thus it is not surprising to find students producing such sentences as "He eat the sandwich."

A second intralingual source of confusion arises from the fact that an -s marks verbs as singular, but it marks nouns as plural. If the student employs a logical strategy, he might well confuse these two contradictory uses of -s.

Still another possible explanation for the -s omission error, error analysts point out, may be the student's adoption of a "strategy of communication."⁶ Because there is redundant linguistic information in the sentence She eats potato chips, he finds he can communicate adequately without worrying about the -s at all. The -s as a marker of person is redundant information because the pronoun she has already signaled the third person.

The error might also be a result of the particular strategy that a teacher has used. Error analysts do not overlook the possibility of "teacher-induced" errors⁷ (sometimes called "transfer of training" errors⁸). Teachers sometimes lead their students into what Richards calls "hypothesizing false concepts" by presenting over-simplified examples without sufficiently warning students of the numerous exceptions.⁹ Students form their own rules based on the language data which the teacher presents; hence, it is imperative to present a rich and representative sample. (A classic case of teacher-induced error can occur when a teacher unwittingly uses the pronoun he for all the examples he writes on the board; the student is likely to generalize he as the only third-person pronoun form.) In the case of the -s ending, teachers, annoyed by the dropping of -s's, may over-emphasize the rule that third-person present singular verbs must have an -s (without mentioning the kind of exceptions listed above). When the student encounters a sentence like Does he eat there often? his attempt to make sense of the verb system comes into conflict with the simplified rule his teacher has been stating. This can lead to frustration, a feeling that the language is unsystematic.

In summary, contrastive analysts would see the -s error as a result of the persistence in the student's TL of NL habits. Error analysts would say that errors are more complex, that they are the result of active strategies that the learner applies to handle new information. Error analysts

would point out that native speakers learning English make many of the same errors that ESL students make. Examine, for example, the following sentence: He find that many of his interest parallel with those of the people around him. This sentence was written not by a foreigner learning English, not by a speaker of BEV, but by a white, upper-class speaker of standard English. Since simplification of consonant clusters is not a distinguishing feature of his dialect, interference would not seem to be a plausible explanation for his error.

Error analysis may appear to leave us with a host of possible explanations. We should explain that our example, omission of -s endings, is particularly susceptible to various explanations. It therefore enabled us to display the different categories of error that have been established by the error analysts. Not all errors suggest such a plethora of possible causes as we have presented here. Nevertheless, one of the primary implications of error analysis research is that since many errors arise from multiple causes, they are likely to disappear only if teachers guide students to see all the different routes that led them to the error.

From this overview, it should be clear that, in the ESL field, there has been an evolution of teachers' attitudes toward error. We believe that a similar evolution has been occurring in composition pedagogy. In ESL, the progression has been clearly defined and openly debated. In the composition field, the shift in attitude has received less systematic treatment, although teachers of basic writing have been

influenced by many of the same changes in the psychology of language pedagogy that have influenced ESL teachers. The important parallels between developments in the two fields become most evident when we examine the central issues which separate two distinct philosophies of error. We label these the product approach (under which fall "corrective" and most of contrastive analysis) and the process approach (under which falls error analysis). The chart below illustrates, in capsule form, some key issues which divide the two approaches to learners' errors--approaches which originated in the ESL field, but which seem equally relevant to composition teaching.

APPROACHES TO LEARNERS' ERRORS

Issue	Product Approach	Process Approach
Why should one study errors?	To produce a linguistic taxonomy of <u>what</u> errors learners make.	To produce a psycholinguistic explanation of <u>why</u> a learner makes an error.
What is the attitude toward error?	Errors are "bad." (Interesting only to the linguistic theorist.)	Errors are "good." (Interesting to the theorist and teacher, and useful to the learner as active tests of his hypotheses.)
What should we do about errors?	Attack individual errors and eliminate them through drill to produce overlearning.	Understand the source of errors: the rule-based system that produces non-standard forms; provide data for new rule formation.

Issue	Product Approach	Process Approach
What can we hope to discover from learners' errors?	The source of failure: those items on which the learner or the program failed.	The strategies which led the learner into the error. (Learners' language is a system--an "Interlanguage" ¹⁰ or an "Approximative System." ¹¹)
How can we account for the fact that a learner makes an error?	It is primarily a failure to learn the correct form (perhaps a case of language interference).	Errors are a natural part of learning a language; they arise from learners' active strategies: over-generalization, ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete rule application, hypothesizing false concepts. ¹²
What are the emphases and goals of instruction?	A <u>teaching</u> perspective: eliminate all errors by establishing correct, automatic habits; mastery of the Target Language is the goal.	A <u>learning</u> perspective: assist the learner in approximating the Target Language; support his active learning strategies and recognize that not all errors will disappear (fossilized forms ¹³).

Our point in presenting these contrasts is to demonstrate that the process approach is a philosophy of error applicable beyond the domain of ESL. Instead of viewing errors as pathologies to be eradicated, the process approach views errors as necessary stages in the gradual acquisition of a language system. Moreover, errors are potentially useful because they are our best indicators of what processes the student is using.

To be sure, the move from a product- to a process-analytic approach to error is occurring in our field as well as in ESL: Professor Mina Shaughnessy's recent book, Errors and

Expectations, is a brilliant case in point. To quote only one example, Professor Shaughnessy insists that we

note how often the errors students make with verbs, no matter how peculiar they may sound to a teacher, are the result not of carelessness or irrationality but of thinking. Part of the task of helping such students master the formal verb system therefore depends upon being able to trace the line of reasoning that has led to erroneous choices rather than upon unloading on the student's memory an indifferent bulk of information about verbs, only part of which relates to his difficulties.¹⁴

Although some scholars and teachers within our discipline have arrived at a process approach to error (by a route apparently independent of work in ESL), we believe that a careful consideration of the issues involved in the evolution of error analysis in ESL can contribute, both theoretically and methodologically, to our study of the errors students make in written composition. Error analysis scholars have, for example, developed a sophisticated terminology for discussing error; we might well utilize that terminology. A standard terminology and shared methodology for investigating error would promote the type of interdisciplinary work that we see as crucial to the advancement of composition theory and pedagogy. We trust that, in the future, there will be increased interchange between error research in first and second language learning.

Footnotes

¹ Leonard Newmark, "How Not to Interfere with Language Learning," International Journal of American Linguistics, 32 (1966), 77-83.

² For a good discussion of issues relating to dialect interference see the following collection of essays: Richard W. Bailey and Jay L. Robinson, eds., Varieties of Present-Day English (New York: Macmillan, 1973).

³ Kenneth S. Goodman, ed., Miscue Analysis: Applications to Reading Instruction (Urbana, Illinois: NCTE, 1973).

⁴ Heidi C. Dulay and Marina K. Burt, "You Can't Learn Without Goofing: An Analysis of Children's Second Language 'Errors,'" in Jack C. Richards, ed., Error Analysis: Perspectives on Second Language Acquisition (London: Longman, 1974), pp. 95-123.

⁵ Jack C. Richards makes this distinction in "A Non-Contrastive Approach to Error Analysis," English Language Teaching 25 (1971), 204-219 (rpt. in Jack C. Richards, ed., Error Analysis, pp. 172-188).

⁶ The term is used by Larry Selinker in "Interlanguage," International Review of Applied Linguistics 10 (1972), 219-231 (rpt. in Jack C. Richards, ed., Error Analysis, pp. 31-54).

⁷ S. Pit Corder mentions this source of error in "Error Analysis, Interlanguage and Second Language Acquisition," Language Teaching Abstracts 8 (1975), 208.

⁸ Another term used by Selinker in "Interlanguage," rpt. in Error Analysis, p. 39.

⁹ A phrase used by Richards in "A Non-Contrastive Approach to Error Analysis," rpt. in Error Analysis, pp. 172-181.

¹⁰ See Selinker, "Interlanguage."

¹¹ William Nemser, "Approximative Systems of Foreign Language Learners," International Review of Applied Linguistics 9 (1971), 115-123 (rpt. in Jack C. Richards, ed., Error Analysis, pp. 55-63).

¹² See Richards, "A Non-Contrastive Approach to Error Analysis," rpt. in Error Analysis, pp. 178-181.

¹³ See Selinker, "Interlanguage," rpt. in Error Analysis, pp. 36-37.

¹⁴ Mena P. Shaughnessy, Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing (New York: Oxford, 1977), p. 105.